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ART OF WAR ESSAY  
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by  
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"WARFIGHTING? Yes! And my ghost is alive and well in the USMC."

Carl Von Clausewitz, April 1989

About a 160 years ago my coffin was not-so-gently eased into a grave and shovel after shovel of dirt began to bury me. At that time, I had no idea that the book I had been working on for several years would ever be completed. I certainly did not think it would be completed by my wife, even though I had shared many ideas with her. However, like so many uncertainties in war, Marie took my disorganized papers - some completed, some not, and had the work published.

To be quite honest, I never imagined the book would be so widely read, translated into so many languages - or that it would be so badly misinterpreted! You see, I was striving to understand and develop a theoretical perspective of war in its purest sense, the search for a "philosophical truth" if you will, not a prescription for any unique situation in war. Writing about philosophical truths and the grizzly business of war didn't make the best seller lists in my day, but it was a task I believed needed to be done.

With that background I'm sure you can now understand why I was so very pleased when General A.M. Gray, USMC

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invited me to the Commandant's House to critique the Marine's new warfighting manual with him. After a couple slaps on the back and a "chew of tobacco" , we got down to what has to have been "one of the best professional art of war discussions" I have had in many decades.

While many military institutions around the globe have tried periodically in the past 150 years to embrace my concepts, this was the first time I've seen an entire institution begin to both understand and apply what I was trying to communicate. Up front, I want to make it perfectly clear that the Marine Warfighting Manual is one of the finest documents I have reviewed in years. What makes me even more pleased to report to you, is that the Corps has developed "an approach to understanding war" that is not based on resource justification, that is not driven by technology, and certainly is not an approach to war that is theater-specific. Instead, the Marines continue to come to grips with being employed as the fighting instrument of their nation's policy.

I must also tell you at the outset that as General Gray and I "jaw-jacked" about this warfighting manual, it became very clear that the Corps had not only turned to me for guidance, but that General Gray's boys had "chewed" with Sun Tzu, and many other theorists and historians - both well-known, and some not-so-well-known to military professionals.

Additionally, while I had based my perspectives largely

on lessons from the Napoleonic era, the Marines have based their concepts on approximately 250 crises (large and small) which cover what they regard as the entire spectrum of conflict. I would also note that Marines tend to emphasize the lower end of this spectrum of conflict, an issue I only began to develop in my analysis of limited aims in war. This should not mean that I think their warfighting concept is based solely on what in contemporary terms is referred to as low-intensity conflict; rather I am of the opinion that Marines understand how they can achieve limited political objectives, while simultaneously accomplishing military aims.

Well, let's shift gears and go over a number of areas that I particularly liked about this warfighting manual, and also share with you a few points on which I advised General Gray that he should be concerned about.

I think what I like best about this manual is its simplicity! Yes, I still believe that all things in war are simple, and the simplest of things are complex - but that doesn't mean our professional military writings should be technical gobbledygook that only a few read, and even fewer understand. The four chapters of this 70 page manual are well laid out, easy to read, and generally easy to understand.

It won't surprise many of you to learn that I really like the way the Marines organized their four chapters: first, to look at the "Nature of War"; second, to discuss

the "Theory of War"; third, to cover the "Preparation for War"; and last to provide a descriptive account of the "Conduct of War". Sounds familiar doesn't it? This organizational approach to warfighting theory gave me great confidence in their concepts. I strongly believe one must first understand the nature and theory of war before one can even begin to talk about preparing for, or describing how one is going to conduct war!

Keys to understanding the nature of war are described succinctly in the manual, which also covers the hostile and independent wills of opponents. I particularly like the descriptions they provide on friction, uncertainty, fluidity and disorder - all areas I wrote about in generally the same context. Their perceptions of the human dimension of war, and violence and danger are areas in which Marines clearly understood my thinking.

In the Marine's second chapter on the theory of war, they have hit the "center of the bull's eye" by coming to grips with war as an instrument of policy. While I emphasized this more in my first book, they never forget "who they are". Further in this chapter they also begin to grapple with the operational level of war, something that I did not specify, but have come to see the value of distinguishing.

It's also in their second chapter that I can trace other theorists even more prominent in shaping their thinking, especially as they see the need to emphasize the

concepts of concentration and speed, surprise and boldness, and, even more importantly, "exploiting vulnerabilities and opportunities". While I addressed these issues in some detail, I must confess that Sun Tzu deserves more credit here for influencing Marine thinking.

Probably the most critical element in the Marine's approach to war is found in Chapter 3, where they discuss how to prepare for war. This chapter really makes me smile, as it shows that Marines understand very clearly that preparation for war must permeate everything a combat unit does - from recruiting to the actual engagement. Included in this discussion is the holistic relationship between planning, organization, doctrine, leadership, training, education and equipping. In a nutshell, their belief that if it doesn't relate to success in combat, it should not merit their nation's resources, is right on the mark!

The Marine's fourth chapter describes how they visualize the conduct of war. I must confess that their vision of seeing, decision-making, shaping and exploiting the battlefield goes beyond many of the concepts I offered. My analysis of these concepts shows they are clearly more a derivative of Sun Tzu's than they are of my warfighting visions. Additionally, the Corps has learned and applied in this chapter a great deal from one of my Kriegsakademie students, Eric Von Ludendorff, particularly in areas of "mission-type orders" and "maneuver-oriented warfare".

Now, while my critique with General Gray was generally

positive, I did point out to him several areas that are of concern to me.

First, the Marines seem to think that the ultimate weapon their combat leaders can possess is their minds. I would certainly agree, but I'm not sure that I support their notion that "coup d'oeil" can be taught. Even with a great deal of education, some things are intuitive. Thus, the term I used was "genius" for war, and everyone cannot be a genius!

Second, while I certainly agree that a "freedom-to-fail" mentality is optimal in peacetime, I'm not so sure the Marine's political environment can tolerate less than a highly sophisticated, success-orientated outcome - especially in terms of real crises and peacetime operations. In my view, the American public simply will not tolerate too many more embarrassments of military performances, regardless of service - even from its beloved Marines!

Last, it's one thing to say you're going to decentralize your approach and not even try to strive for certainty in decision making, it is quite another to actually operate this way, even in peacetime! Signs that this approach to leadership has permeated throughout the Corps have yet to be totally convincing to me.

My final concern has to do with how well the Corps will be able to identify and attack enemy centers of gravity. This warfighting manual is not written as a "joint" art of war guide. Rather, it is definitely unique to the USMC! At



some points on the spectrum of conflict, and at some levels of war, Marines may indeed be able to identify and attack the opponent's center of gravity. In other conflicts, Marines must operate alongside, and subordinate to, combined and joint units - some of which do not even understand how to identify what the center of gravity is, and most of which intellectually approach war quite differently. This concern goes beyond interoperability. It cuts to the very heart of understanding the nature of war, and is an area which will require tremendous sophistication by Marines as they deal with other military and civilian leaders.

Let me summarize my critique of the Marine's warfighting concepts by simply saying that these warriors do more than chew tobacco well. Their hearts and minds are into the art of war, and clearly, they have not forgotten who they are!